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ABSTRACT

To function effectively, a college board of trustees should act as a single body rather than as a group of individuals, should attempt to work on the basis of consensus, and should avoid the development of factional activity. Perhaps the most important method of ensuring that a board of trustees is operating effectively, both as individuals and as a single entity, is through an evaluation process that constructively confronts current concerns and challenges. This evaluation process should seek to improve performance, to review and establish goals, and to provide an example of evaluation for other constituency groups. To achieve these goals, a reviewing partnership should be maintained between the board and the college president--a partnership based on shared responsibility for evaluation, a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, and an understanding that board and presidential leadership are inseparable. The evaluation process itself may take a variety of forms, including periodic informal meetings or retreats, utilization of the assistance provided by professional associations or consultants, or a self-assessment questionnaire followed by subsequent board meetings. Whichever process is chosen, the results should be integrated into the rest of the board's efforts. Given increasing financial and personnel problems, self-evaluation by college boards is especially important as a means of demonstrating trustee accountability. (HB)

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THE PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE ON BOARD EVALUATION

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THE PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE ON BOARD EVALUATION

This is the type of presentation made by a president with one, or more, of three characteristics:

1) Total trustee support;

2) A long-term contract; or

3) A complete lack of appreciation for the real world.

But regardless of a president's characteristics, successful boards share a most important characteristic: unanimity. Conceptually, a board of trustees should be one board rather than a group of trustees. The cohesiveness of a board should be such that it functions as a single entity. Therefore, board evaluation means evaluating the performance of the board as a unit, as well as evaluating the performance of the individual trustees. The importance of distinguishing the board from the trustees will be examined first. Then the purpose of evaluation will be explored before analyzing the primary mechanism of evaluation, the board-president reviewing partnership. And finally, some specific methods and techniques of board evaluation will be discussed.

Because it is fundamental, I shall first address the importance of maintaining and enhancing board unity and why it should be the focus of any board evaluation.

Legally, the word "board" means:

> "An official or representative body organized to perform a trust or to execute official or representative functions..."

The legal concept of a board acting when the individual board members are gathered together at one time and place is reinforced by the practical aspects of the world of business. Sound business practice dictates that an individual should report to only one boss - otherwise, sooner or later, that individual

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Henry Campbell Black, M.A., Black's Law Dictionary, West Publishing Co., 1968, pp. 219.

will be caught in the middle, caught in a no-win situation of conflicting demands for time and loyalty. The board must be a single boss, i.e., act only as a board and not as individual bosses. Individual members of a board should not attempt to speak "for the board."

Board evaluation, of itself, and of the president, and of their inter-relationship, is a most important tool in maintaining and enhancing the board's concept of "boardness." That is, the board is a single entity, legally, and hopefully in all other respects. The effective board is a unified team. It may disagree for discussion purposes, and the board should, in its deliberations, voice all relevant concerns: constructive disagreement can be valuable in reaching the best decision. The resulting synergism means that as a board, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. But the board should strive diligently for consensus on any decision. Consensus means general agreement, that the individuals have talked their differences through so that all feel comfortable with the decision reached. If consensus is not possible, certainly it is imperative that board members unify immediately after the vote and support it wholeheartedly, in private as well as public. Great harm can be done to a board decision through a "minority-report," whether the individual overtly complains or just covertly undermines the decision by remaining silent when words are called for.

Given the importance of consensus to board unity, boards should learn to recognize some events which will inhibit or diminish that unity.

For example, a new trustee must be made to feel part of the whole, not part of a faction. This is especially true in states where a trustee is elected rather than appointed to office.

Collective bargaining can also inhibit unification. Most educational

boards have entered collective bargaining totally unprepared. Many boards have been beaten at the bargaining table, and then destroyed by the news media.

Another potential threat to board unity is the "single issue" trustee who may emerge in the future (more so than in the past). Such an individual must be given a broader perspective if that trustee is to be truly effective.

Evaluation time is an opportunity for the board to work together in assessing individual and collective performance as board members. Therefore, it is important to avoid reiteration of old, stale gripes. Evaluation should focus on the five C's: constructively confronting current concerns and challenges. Let me repeat that: constructively confronting current concerns and challenges.

Board evaluation should be a planned, deliberate, conscious, dispassionate analysis of the trustees' ability to function together as a single entity: the board of trustees. A united board is one where there are no factions - a united board means all board members fully support a board decision, because it is the board's decision. The result is a board which stands together before the college and the community, and therefore board evaluation must include an assessment of board unity as well as of trustee performance. Any evaluation of a board must therefore be conducted along two different dimensions: (1) evaluating the individual performances of trustees and (2) evaluating the collective performance of the board. At Fort Steilacoom Community College we use one instrument to assess the board performance and another to assess trustee performance.

Thus board unity should precede board evaluation but as will be discussed later, the process of board evaluation may in turn encourage board cohesiveness.

Now let us look more closely at board evaluation. One may ask "Why evaluate a board of trustees?" There are at least three reasons:

1) To improve performance.

2) To review and re-establish goals.

3) To provide an example, of evaluation for other constituency groups.

Therefore, the purpose of board evaluation is to elicit from board members their perceptions of how effectively they feel they are functioning in relation to various criteria. The board, working with the president, can and should seek to improve the quality of decision-making, to increase and enrich board effectiveness. Thus, board evaluation is part of continuing education for the trustees and the most valuable asset for any president is an effective board.

The result is a board-president reviewing partnership, a unique relationship. Shared responsibility for evaluation is necessary to assure the quality of the relationship and candid re-examination of changing circumstances. As you know, trustees can be the stabilizing force of a college, but all too frequently that is not the case. Boards should evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of presidents and themselves. Evaluation means that feedback on the board's and president's performance result in learning and in planned adjustments. In the process, the board should determine whether there is a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, which can produce better working relationships for the entire college. However, a board should wait to delineate expectations of the president at the time of his or her contract negotiations. Also, evaluation should be avoided during periods of crisis. Emotionalism has no part in objective evaluation. Both trustees and presidents should accept the fact that review of either party in the evaluation process is also a review of the other. Board and presidential leadership are inseparable.

The board's most important contribution to the campus is the final decision regarding hiring and terminating the president. In other decisions about

the campus, the president and board form a team. The board and the president can work together on many projects, but the process of a joint evaluation may be the most important task that either will ever undertake.

So far as the college goes, trustees should keep their nose in and their fingers out. That is, a board should monitor, not direct. The dynamics of an effective president and effective board chairman, and a properly performing board are complex and challenging. Mutual confidence is a necessary prerequisite of good president-board relations, and self-evaluation can be a valuable tool that can assist towards that end. The board and the president must work together to develop and sustain shared confidence in their pursuit of the same goals. And a knowledgeable board is a better board. Therefore I share with you seven practices for a president or other chief executive which Louis W. Cabot cites in the Harvard Business Review as too often neglected:

"1) Present important issues to directors before, not after, management has taken a firm position.

2) Make sure that directors get all the information management considers important. This means both the pros and the cons.

3) Don't bury important information in a snowdrift of data that busy outsiders can never dig through.

4) Give directors a reasonable span of time to reach difficult decisions.

5) Be sure there is enough time for full discussion in board meetings.

6) Use an executive committee to deal with routine matters.

7) Let others carry the discussion in meetings.

And so the board-president reviewing partnership works best when both sides appreciate the value of the process and each other's contribution to that process. Having established board unity as the focus of board evaluation and

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Louis W. Cabot, "On an effective board," Harvard Business Review, September-October 1976, Harvard University, Vol. 54, No. 5, pp. 40-46.

having set forth the purpose of evaluation and how the board-president reviewing partnership is necessary to carry out that purpose, let's briefly review the several specific methods and techniques of evaluation which are available: meetings, questionnaires, professional association experts or private consultants.

All of these techniques work best when evaluation is viewed as an integral component of the board's ongoing work and not as an isolated, unrelated event. The evaluation process should include assessment of progress toward stated goals, determining reasons for attainment or lack thereof, and dedication to new goals as well as rededication to continuing goals. Now let us examine four methods or processes of evaluation.

(1) Periodic meetings or perhaps a retreat. Presidents and trustees need to, occasionally shift their time investment to include a more relaxed "block of time - glass of wine" atmosphere. Such a meeting might have a list of issues or list of questions rather than an "agenda" per se. Or by contrast, the meetings might be more structured in nature. It is the process that is of real significance in this mode of evaluation. The style of the board, and the style of the president, should dictate the appropriate meeting format. In the most extenuating circumstances, confidential meetings might be appropriate. The board chairman would meet with individual trustees rather than conducting evaluations with the full board present at a single meeting. This technique is useful if the board has substantial turnover, or if a critical situation results in a need to treat privileged information in a confidential manner.

(2) Professional association assistance: Several professional associations such as AACJC, ACCT, ACB, and ACE can provide assistance to a board that seeks external resources to assist in the evaluation process. For example, the AGB process is widely used.

First, the advisor receives pertinent background information on the board's performance and perceptions.

Second, a two-day workshop is conducted by an individual who is knowledgeable in techniques for assisting the board in developing a board plan for self-improvement.

(3) Checklist or more often a questionnaire: The success of this mode turns on formulating the best possible questions. The steps are to administer, analyze, and discuss the questionnaire and its results. Questions might be broad and exploratory and then focus on a particular aspect, such as budget, organization, fund raising, etc. Different survey formats include: a) a forced, categorical choice such as yes-no or true-false; b) a rating scale: for example, plus -check - minus, or a 1 through 5 rating scale; c) complete the sentence; d) short answer essay. Published packages of checklists, questionnaires, or other surveys are available, but one should consider modifying the questions regarding any individual criterion so that the results are relevant to particular issues which concern the board. The questionnaire may be preliminary to a meeting or series of meetings and is especially good when the board is scattered geographically and time together must of necessity be put to the best possible use. The questionnaire format without subsequent meetings lacks an interactive dimension that is especially valuable. Advantages of this method are that it can prove to be a thorough technique and may reveal unknown areas of agreement or disagreement. Disadvantages are the effort and time of selecting or designing an instrument and then the participants' time and effort, especially if a lengthy or detailed instrument is to be completed.

(4) Private consultant. The professional perspective of an outsider may assist a board in assessing its performance. The consultant can guide the board

in identifying problem areas and devising methods to achieve the needed improvements. However, two cautions are in order. If there is general agreement on whom should be the consultant and the consultant gets the background needed to be effective, he or she can prove to be a real asset to the evaluating process. This is especially true when strongly-held but contrary views on the board require mediating.

Whether the periodic meeting, retreat, confidential meeting, professional association assistance, questionnaire, private consultant, or some combination of these methods of evaluation is selected, all have several elements in common. The first is the degree of structure which may range from casual to formal. A correlated dimension is the nature and quantity of documentation, which usually increases with the proceedings' degree of formality. Some evaluation tools from the business sector may be helpful if selectively utilized, e.g., management by objectives. Another dimension is the degree to which board evaluation is integrated into the rest of the board's efforts.

Having analyzed and discussed these different techniques, we at Fort Steilacoom use questionnaires as the launch point for a thorough discussion of performance. Evaluation criteria and topics for review are detailed in several forms which we use. So for your convenience, copies of Fort Steilacoom's questionnaires are available here at the head table.

In conclusion, the importance of board unity is paramount. The importance of board evaluation as a means of preserving and strengthening that unity is worthy of strong presidential commitment. A final caution, however, is in order. Trustees, working with the president, must engage in board evaluation, or else the job will be done for them, in perhaps a rather unstructured, unscientific manner.

Why do I state this so emphatically? Because of the formula T + A = E.

"T" is for trustee. A trustee is defined in Black's Law Dictionary as:

> "The person appointed or required by law to execute a trust; one in whom...power is vested, under an express or implied agreement to administer or exercise it for the benefit or to the use of another."

"A" is for accountability. Accountability means "obliged to account for one's acts," elsewhere accountability is defined as "responsible; liable." And certainly in this era of regulations and lawsuits, officials (whether elected or appointed) are being held accountable as never before. The public, especially taxpayers, are demanding greater accountability for fewer dollars. Caveat: The margins for error are more narrow when fewer funds are available. And as colleges are evolving, we are seeing more and more to account for. The stakes are high when trustees are confronting difficult circumstances of major proportions. For example:

1) Federal and state funding is declining dramatically.
2) Students are worried about decreasing financial aid and fewer colleges with fewer programs and fewer courses.
3) Faculty unrest is prevalent.
4) Classified staff with their generally low salaries are hit hard by inflation.
5) Administrators are being paid less for twelve months than faculty are paid for nine and some administrators are beginning to ask why.
6) More presidents are burning out faster.

<u>For these, and other factors, trustees will be held accountable</u>.

In most states, we will begin dealing with the management of change during years of crisis - fiscal and governance. Education's 3'r's of "Reading, Writing, and 'Rithmetic," will become "Reduction, Reallocation and Retrenchment."

After weighing the consequences of each, boards will be choosing among various alternatives. Boards would do well to weigh the consequences of wrong choices, especially in those difficult situations where there is no right answer and the board is trying to select the least wrong answer. Boards cannot afford the luxury of making decisions blindly, of continuing to operate without periodically stepping back and evaluating the processes and the products of their decision-making. Evaluation better enables trustees to accept the heavy fiscal and personnel responsibilities that this decade will continue to present.

Accountability, as applied to trustees, means "Has the power vested in the trustees been exercised responsibly and for the benefit of the students?"

I submit that board evaluation is the only means of answering that question.

Therefore, the equation: T + A = E. Trustee plus accountabilty equals evaluation. Boards must hold themselves accountable or else the public, through legislation, regulation, and litigation, will do it for the board.

A final thought I'd like to share with you. College presidents are like trolley cars, trustees can find one to take them any place they want to go. However, good presidents are becoming as rare as trolley cars. Many good presidents have deserted or are deserting the field. Good presidents, and good trustees, must be perpetuated. We must preserve and protect good presidents and good trustees like all other endangered species. Through board evaluation, trustees and presidents can learn to more effectively lead community colleges into an uncertain future.

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